The Comic Genius of R.K. Narayan

An outstanding gift of R.K. Narayan as a fiction writer is his 'capacity to affect a comic catharsis', the cathartic happiness. His laughter which he expresses through his characters, situations and well-made scenes is intensely happy, not in the least tainted by cynicism and never by bitterness. As humour requires kindly amused perception of incongruities and absurdities of life and the artistic expression of such perception, Narayan's humour is all pervasive and most varied. As a true humorist he has some Shakespearean kind of sympathy and gentleness of heart in the exploration of incongruities of life, discrepancy or contrast between what is and what should be, between illusion and reality, by exposing and ridiculing human follies and frivolities. Though his humour is ironic in tone, Narayan is not a satirist moralizing and lashing with indignation at human wickedness and vices with a view to correcting them. He is always suggesting. As irony is composed of two opposites which are contrasting, Narayan's irony is a rich compound of broad humour, gentle mockery and genial ridicule. There is no doubt that his irony is always compatible with the most intense feelings, there is hardly any scope in it for the arid realms of dreary sentimental thinking or for a hysterical and distracting sentimentality. He uses delicate irony with a view to measuring a detached observation and side by side illuminating the character of a person and exposing his weaknesses. Such a method as applied by Narayan helps arouse love in the
reader's heart for the person whom the author intends to be loved. And here he succeeds marvellously.

Professor K.R. Srinivas Iyengar calls Narayan 'a master of comedy'. But his comedy is never one-sided. It is a serious comedy that springs from the diversity of human experience and Narayan's compassionate but objective understanding of it. His moral vision is vitalized by his technique of comedy. The depth in comedy results by Narayan's acceptance of traditional and religious values which serve to place his characters in moral relief. He seems to use comedy in order to distinguish between the abiding and the absurd. That is why, his moral vision and objective humanism are never deliberately and consciously cultivated in his writing. They are the inherent part of his story-telling and the cultural environment represented by Malgudi that forms the background of all his novels and short stories.

The human quality of his comedy owes considerably to his attractiveness for eccentric behaviour which he finds in human beings. As his art 'is an imitation of life', much of the humour in his fiction results from the discrepancy which he intends to manifest between the normal code and the exaggerated dedication of the eccentric person to it or total deviation from it. Kailas in 'The Bachelor of Arts' and Marco in 'The Guide' are unique examples of this eccentric behaviour as the former is so much obsessive to drinks and prostitution despite his outgrowing age and two wives at home while the latter has even no time to entertain his young and beautiful wife. The one is
skin to exaggerated dedication while the other has a total deviation from the reality of flesh and blood.

Narayan's use of serious comedy in his fiction seems to have been inspired by life itself. As life is neither totally a tragedy nor completely a comedy, Narayan's serious comedy presents smiles and tears together. William Walsh rightly observes that Narayan's irony is one of 'recognition' and not of 'correction' and therefore, his comedy is more human than a mere technical device to rouse laughter for the sake of laughter. Instead of confining his whole attention to the small slice of life and showing interest in the complexity of human relations he presents a panoramic view of life.

Narayan's serious comedy covers a wide range inclusive of archetypal comedy, comedy of misunderstanding, comedy of sublime and ridiculous, comedy of conventions and comedy of manners (to some extent different from the Restoration Comedy of manners), & comedy of mischance and misdirection. Professor Iyengar rightly observes that despite Narayan's mastery over comedy he is not unaware of the tragedy of the human situation; he is neither intolerant critic of Indian ways and modes nor their fanatic defender, he is on the whole, content to snap Malgudi life's little ironies, knots of satiric circumstance, and tragi-comedy of mischance and misdirection.

In R.K. Narayan's fiction we have intensely a happy laughter which is free from the taint of cynicism and bitterness.
There is pure sentiment and fine humour corrected from the cheap sentimentality by his detached and loving irony. Its net result is pure aesthetic delight, happiness and peace.

In his early novels - 'Swami & Friends' (1935), 'The Bachelor of Arts' (1937), 'The Dark Room' (1938) and 'The English Teacher' (1944) Narayan's comic vision is limited to the eccentricities and idiosyncrasies of schoolboys, teachers, bully husband and traditionally conscious as well as unconscious wives. Comedy of innocence and comedy of mischance and misdirection spring from their oddities and angularities of behaviour. In his later novels comedy grows into dimensions and it takes the form of comedy of sublime and the ridiculous, archetypal comedy and comedy of manners. Narayan's earliest admirer among the fellow novelists, Greene observes that his (Narayan's) comedy depends primarily upon classicism and conventionalism. "... comedy needs a strong framework of social convention with which the author sympathises. ... But the life of Malgudi - never ruffled by politics - proceeds in exactly the same way as it has done for centuries, and the juxtaposition of the age-old conventions and the modern character provides much of the comedy".

Graham Greene's observations are more applicable to Narayan's earlier novels - 'Swami & Friends' and 'The Bachelor of Arts' - than the post-Independence novels among which 'The Man-Eater of Malgudi' is obviously typical. There are cardinaly two types of comedy in Narayan's fiction - the one that arises from the 'disturbance of a classic way of life by the modern; and the comedy that takes its origin from the abrupt and brutal incursion of evil, violence, corruption into the
specific eccentricity of the Malgudi world. 'Swami & Friends' and 'The Bachelor of Arts' are devoid of serious psychological probing which we find in 'The Guide', 'Mr. Sampath', 'The Man-eater of Malgudi', 'The Vendor of Sweets' and 'A Tiger for Malgudi'. It is interesting to notice that in novels from 'Mr. Sampath' onwards the private life themes concentrating on the individual are more obvious. Narayan himself points out in the Atlantic Monthly how nationalism prevented the would-be comic-writer from concentrating on the sphere of comedy. Then the private life of the individual was sacrificed on the altar of national struggle for freedom. But subsequently the change took place, and after independence the writer confined himself to depict the way of life of the group of people with whose psychology and background he was most familiar. Had Narayan confined his comedy to classicism and conventionalism, as Graham Greene remarked in his introduction to 'The Financial Expert', all his Malgudi novels would have been placed at a single moment of time. The 'Edwardian' novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett are placed at a single moment of time, as she herself points out:

"I donot feel that I have any real or organic knowledge of life later than about 1910. I should not write of later times with enough grasp and confidence. I think this is why, many writers tend to write of the past. When an age is ended, you see it as it is. And I have a dislike, which I cannot explain, of dealing with modern machinery and inventions. When war casts its shadow, I find that I recoil."
It is, therefore, obvious that time stands still in Burnett's fiction, but Narayan's novels, in fact, march in step with the time and the evolving history of the twentieth century. This fact is detected from the discerning study of his fiction that Narayan is interestingly involved with the comedy of change inclusive of the illusion of progress. Apart from the Malgudi setting, the common ingredient in all his subsequent novels is the theme of private life of individuals instead of the frantic public life of India before independence, during independence and after independence.

Thus Narayan is the successful practitioner of serious comedy. Through his comic mode he seems to affirm that the average and the common place is also capable of the highest tragedy of human life. His tragi-comic novels and short-stories indicate how love, money, prestige, physical beauty are all generators of illusion with a view to driving away from the reality. All complications in human relationship emerge from these illusive things, and therefore, for the establishment of right relationship, man should try to get rid of such illusion. There is no doubt that it is through tragedy that serious problems of life are grappled, but Narayan seems to highlight the point that in the hands of a consummate artist even comedy is capable of tackling all serious problems equally well. And herein lies his greatness as a comic artist of high order.

His Art of Characterization

According to Aristotle, 'Character is the soul of Tragedy.' But the same remark is applicable to the novel also. It is really
through characterization that the greatness of a novelist is measured. Narayan is a very dedicated writer who relies considerably on artistic intuition, on a feeling for the appropriate gesture, attitude and action or remark in order to realize his character's personality. His 'focus is on character' as he himself told Roland E. Holseley,

"I can write best when I don't plan the subject too elaborately — All I can settle for myself is my protagonist's general type of personality. If his personality comes alive, the rest is easy for me; background and minor characters develop as I progress".4

Chandran (The Bachelor of Arts'), Krishnan (The English Teacher'), Margayya (The Financial Expert'), Raju (The Guide') Vasu (The Kan-Dater of Malgudi) Jagan (The Vendor of Sweets), Raman (The Painter of Signs) and Raja (A Tiger For Malgudi') veritably testify to this dominance of the main characters in his novels. Narayan creates characters with the combination of a process of imaginative gestation and careful observation of people he has seen around him.

He told Hans Beerman how he selected characters in his novels and short stories:

"They are partially based on local Mysore folk and acquaintances of mine — but not wholly. I often build them up. However, I make no deliberate studies. Still, Mysore is a small enough place that lends itself to acute observation. It seems to me that more eccentric people live here than elsewhere."5
If anyone who happens to be in Mysore, will find the characters of Narayan's fiction virtually moving there in market places, the railway station, and sitting at shops and working in the printing presses. Narayan himself feels like his own protagonist, Raju

"...especially when I am telling about Mysore". 5

He tells how 'some family incidents and his own character had given him the conception of Raju and that Rosie and her husband Marco had a similar genesis'. Narayan correlates life and art in such a convincing manner that they are fused into one. He avoids being merely an author of delightful comic entertainments. His serious observation of life consists of its cardinal aspects—sad, funny, ironic, incongruous, absurd, eccentric, tender and holy. His fourth novel, 'The English Teacher' is more autobiographical than any other novel he has published so far. 'Mr. Sampath' is also based on a real-life person of the same name, who not only remained Narayan's printer but also had allowed the novelist to use his name freely. 7 His 'Financial Expert', too, has the amalgamation of two-real-life persons whose exploits induced him to gather the basic ingredients of Narayya's story. He

"...considers his morning walk his office hours because he stops and talks to people, many of whom chat with him freely about their doings and their troubles...he observes their ways closely". 8
This experience seems to have been clearly described in "The Man-Hater of Malgudi" emphasising with Natraj who starts his day in a similar manner. Natraj tells:

"My day started before four in the morning. The streets would be quite dark when I set out to the river for my ablutions. - - - All along the way I had my well-defined encounters. The milkman started on his rounds, - - - greeted me respectfully and asked, "what is the time master?" - - a question I allowed to die without a reply - - I simpered and let him pass suppressing the question."

It is, therefore, clear that Narayan depends considerably on objective characterization and this is one of the reasons that his characters not only appear to be real, but also are objective. It is through precision and care that he builds them interesting and loveable. His characters remain within their resolved limits and act and move in the local atmosphere of Malgudi.

His Concept Of the Hero

It is clear that Narayan selects the living characters from society to portray them in his fiction. Among them the hero is the most important person to dominate the whole course of events by dint of his personality and character, but not like epic heroes who have heroic qualities and are shown to have been gifted with unquestionable courage and vitality. The hero in Narayan's novel is an average man belonging to the middle class
of South Indian society and having a mark potential for the uncommon. This mark potential for uncommon brings him into clash with circumstances and he is overpowered eventually and becomes a tool in the hands of destiny as well as in the enormity of his own creation till he is forced by his inner self to return to a more mature state of ordinary. Therefore, the usual pattern into which his hero is woven is obvious from one novel to another. It is from average to the extraordinary and returning to a more poignant state of average. This appears to be a reiterated movement basically in regard to interacting characters in the majority of Narayan’s novels. But it does not mean that Narayan’s art of characterization is static. It is certainly dynamic because in spite of this usual pattern: average – extraordinary – and average with maturity, there is a variety of protagonistic.

This usual pattern is evident right from his first novel, 'Swami & Friends'. Narayan introduces the ordinary hero Swaminathan who in contact with his companions grows to a mature state at last. His ideal friend is Rajan who happens to be the son of a D.S.P. and presumably a sophisticated boy in tastes and manners. This superiority of Rajan is a total contrast to Swami’s inferiority complex composed of ‘apprehension, weakness and nervousness’. This pair of inferior and superior occupies the canvas of the novelist and appears almost in all novels published so far. Out of thirteen novels, ten are those which have been given protagonistic titles: 'The Bachelor of Arts', 'The English Teacher', 'Mr. Sampath', 'The Financial Expert', 'The Man – Eater Of Malgudi', 'The Guide', 'The Vendor of Sweets', 'The Painter
Of Signs' and 'A Tiger For Malgudi' and the maiden novel, 'Swami & Friends'. The protagonist could be the same character under the influence of other character, but his unquenchable quest for a positive philosophy of life remains undisturbed till he attains spiritual maturity. The ways to cross the journey of life may be different, but the goal is the same. This happens to be the prime object of almost every protagonist of Narayan's novels.

It is a discernible tendency of Narayan's art of characterization to present a contrast to his hero so that his personality could grow into dimensions. This characteristic can be noted in his ten novels particularly for instance, Swami is a contrast to Rajan in 'Swami & Friends' as the former is governed by feeling and the latter by reason and common sense. Chandran and Mohan in 'The Bachelor of Arts', Krishnan and the soul of his deceased wife in 'The English Teacher' Sampath and Srinivas in 'Mr. Sampath', Margayya and Dr. Pal in 'The Financial Expert', Raju and Marco and thereafter Raju and Valen in 'The Guide', Natraj and Vasu in 'The Man Eater of Malgudi', Jagan and cousin in 'The Vendor of Sweets', Raman and Daisy in 'The Painter of Signs' and Raja and Hermit in 'A Tiger For Malgudi' present a contrast to one another. This contrast is symbolized by feeling and reasons. Chandran, Krishnan, Srinivas, Margayya, Natraj, Jagan, Raman have their prototype in Swaminathan, the model on which Narayan developed the personality of all these protagonists. The second line on which the protagonist are developed is the line of reason. Sampath, Dr. Pal, Raju,
Narayya, and Vasu are made, more or less, of the same stuff. Therefore, there are two types of protagonists in Narayan's novels who become instrumental in bringing about the desired revelation of life to the hero.

Insipite of his ordinary personality and average background a Narayan hero is a prominent man, not by virtue of his talents but because of his significant presence in almost all the events which may differ from one novel to another, but their scheme is the same. The hero, being ordinary and at commonplace is subject to some dramatic happening in course of his life. This dramatic happening is bound to be resulting into a more mature experience beyond which no worse than that has already affected severly can trouble the hero's mind in Narayan's novels. Morality and psychology are fused to analyse the workings of the hero's mind. The main purpose of the author is to show the growth of an individual from anonymity to glory. The thematic pattern within which the lives of his protagonists appear to be working is the acceptance of life inspite of its irrationalities and absurdities. The hero accepts life in totality. But he is the blend of virtue and vice as all human beings are.

His Concept Of the Heroine

The heroines of Narayan's novels are flimsy. He has himself revealed this fact in his interview with Onlooker:

"Why was it he had no heroines but heroes in his novels?"
Mr. Narayan corrected Onlooker,

"I have no heroes, only non-heroes, and of course no heroines". 11

It is because he finds women firm and forbearing. Their life is governed by set regulations and they are basically clean-headed, at least in the small town world of his novels, and short stories. Men have a tendency to stumble and become uncertain, as Narayan could discover through his insight in human beings, and they are usually uncertain. He found women more stereotyped than men.

However, some heroines in his novels are not only impressive but also bewitching. There are two lines on which his women characters have been designed. Those who are deep-rooted in Hindu culture appear in early novels - 'The English Teacher', 'Mr. Sampath' (Srinivas' wife) and those who look foreigners at home figure in the later novels. Sunita of 'The Dark Room' and Sushila of 'The English Teacher' are the representation of Hindu middleclass housewives who have their strong roots in ancient Hindu culture and a sacrificing zeal. But heroines of the later novels are a blend of East-West tendencies to a great extent, the western tendency affecting their persons surprisingly. Their aspirations are more dominating than the actuality. Shantabai in 'The Dark Room', Shanti in 'Mr. Sampath', Rosia in 'The Guide' and Daisy in 'The Painter of Signs' appear to have been made of similar stuff of apprehension, revolt and deviation from the normal code of life.
Yet they are free from the analytical experiment of the novelist who seems to believe that despite their objectionable obsession to strange objects, they are still clearheaded, if not completely, at least better than men comparatively.

**Minor Characters**

As already clarified by Narayan in his interview with W.S. Walsley, minor characters are developed in the course of progress of the story. Nevertheless, there is a galaxy of minor characters who are helpful and adaptable to the protagonists, and at times they are allowed to appear equally as important as the main characters are Hari and Pooni in 'The Dark Room', Gangu and Sannamma in the same novel, Ravi and the house owner in 'Mr. Sampath', Kailas in 'The Bachelor of Arts', Ranji, Sastri, Sek, the Nehru - baiting journalist in 'The Man-Baiter of Malgudi', Dr. Kishan in 'Second Opinion' and Captain and his wife in 'A Tiger for Malgudi' are all memorable characters of flesh and blood, of virtues and vices as their counterparts in the real life are.

Narayan uses perennials and prototypes both who are based on culturally convincing ideology. But he, as Raji Narasimhan states:

"Provides the best illustration of the first type (perennials). Essentially, almost all his characters are re-creations of one basic character; a basic Narayan character. What prevents this from polling is his ever-fresh enthusiasm for the revived character, a genuine and quiet, unaffected
liking for him. But apart from these re-creations of a basic figure there are some who appear as Staccato. They are left untouched and, apparently, are considered plastic enough by the author to blend into the particular mood and situation."¹²

She is partially right in her statement that apart from the recreations of a basic figure some staccato figures are left untouched. The fact seems that they also influence the basic character in one way or the other. And if they are not woven in the plot as a logical integration, it is because they appear almost on the occasion when their presence is unavoidably felt. The grandmother is one of such figures. She would be familiar with all South Indian orthodox ways of life. The adjournment lawyer also figures in most of the novels (The Guide & 'The Man-Eater of Malgudi'). And the most important character is the town, Malgudi, which has perpetuated in thirteen novels and eighty-four short stories so far. Professor K.R.S. Iyengar rightly suggests that it would be

"... interesting to advance the theory that Malgudi is the real hero of the -- novels and the many short stories; that underneath the seeming change and the human drama there is something - the 'soul' of the place? - that defies, or embraces, all change and is triumphantly and unalterably itself".¹³

It is evident that Narayan's novels are cardinally the novels of characters and it is unmistakably through characterization that he affirms his vision of life. In his characterization he may not be as great as Shakespeare and Charles Dickens are, but he is the adept delineator of the convincing characters
which are part fiction and part fact. Like Jane Austen's, his range of character is not only limited but also more convincing because he chooses them from the middle class of South India. Having psychological inconsistency they are full of life and vitality. They are neither saints nor sinners but entirely human in their likes and dislikes as we people are. Krishnan, Ramani, Sampath, Margayya, Raju, Rosie, Marco, Gajapathi, Shantabai, Raja and Tiger-Hermit—all are his memorable creations.

**His Humour, Irony, Satire, Wit & Exaggeration.**

Humour, as defined by Penguin English Dictionary, is 'capacity for seeing the funny side of things; cheerful and good-tempered amusement'. Thackeray calls it, 'a mixture of love and wit'. The same idea is put in a different wording by Hegel, "What... is inseparable from the comic is distinguished from the merely laughable is an infinite geniality and confidence, capable of rising superior to its own contradiction, and experiencing there in no taint of bitterness or sense of misfortune whatever". 14

Narayan's humour, as he defines in his essay 'On Humour' in 'Next Sunday', "...lightens the burden of existence". But he warns his readers that it still remains the individual business, and therefore, it should not be analysed and studied separately. It does not mean that he is against analysis and study but because humour is not a device to be applied for inducing laughter; it is the consummation of the human instinct for laughter.
Narayan derives inspiration for his humour from the 'absurdities and contradictions seen in public life'. The self-important men like 'Vasu' also provide ingredient for his humour because of their pompositions. The elaborate pageantry at the arrival and departure of the V.I.P. and the ridiculous fuss of the bureaucrats then also inspire his imagination to create a funny scene with the pure intention to create laughter and side by side lay his finger on trivialities of the situation. Thus, we get in his fiction humour of character or humour arising from the odd and grotesque in character or person, humour of situation or farcical humour, humour arising from jokes, jests, repartees, retorts and the clever use of the language from various points of view. Sometimes his humour admirably mingles with pathos and then the reader is led to smile through his tears. Even at the moments of the highest tragedy Narayan can be comic. Satiric humour is also there in his novels and short stories but it is primarily used to satirise money-lenders, greedy businessmen, extorting houseowners, blackmarketeers and profiteers, producers of obscene films, credulous simpletons, fake sanyasis, half-hearted dreamers, speculators and twisters. But in this satiric humour he is so mild and gentle that it is very often difficult to discover and decide whether he is satiric or he is intending to expose and ridicule for the amusement of his readers. Since he accepts life as it is howsoever irrational and absurd it may be, his humour is ironical, genial and kindly. He is hardly carried away by the zeal of the reformer. It is his nature to be a humorist of the ridiculous and the sublime, but he is not
a satirist. Professor C.D. Narasimhaiah rightly remarks and effectively points out that:

"Narayan's sense of the comic is sustained not by the Dickensian kind of exaggeration but rather, if a comparison has to be made to enlist understanding and evoke response, the irony of understatement practised by a Jane Austen".

The difference between Jane Austen and R.K. Narayan is that the former relies essentially on artistic amusement while the latter on artistic detachment. The artistic detachment is suitable to Narayan's shy temperament. His chief aim lies at showing the discrepancy between actuality and aspiration. The common is presented in somewhat uncommon way so that the inconsistency in the protagonist's behaviour and action could be recognized.

Narayan's humour is tolerant, urban and genial. As a comic writer he is closer in spirit to Chaucer, Shakespeare and Dickens than to Swift, Voltaire and Thackeray. Graham Greene compared Narayan to Chekhov and stated that he was closer to Chekhov than to any English author. Professor V.V. Kantak points out:

"The resemblance indeed is striking - the same objectivity, the same freedom from comment, the same "intricate alliance" of humour with tragedy - the comic flowing into delicate pathos, as delicate as the faint discolouration of ivory with age, as Greene puts it - and the same seeming indirection of event with which the characters, on the last page, appear


to vanish into life. Narayan's light vivid style with its sense of time passing, of the unrealized beauty of human relationships so often recalls Chekhov's.\textsuperscript{16}

But it will be incorrect to be presumptuous about any attempt, conscious or unconscious, at imitation by Narayan. The social milieus of Chekhov and Narayan are different, and so are their tenets of ethos. Chekhov had less freedom from social commitment or comment than Narayan. Narayan's comic vision is marked by a greater degree of optimism and affirmation. It is true that their attitudes to story and character have a marked affinity: Panduranga Rao inquires about this comparison in an interview with the novelist:

"They compare you to Chekhov. Have you read him?".

"Yes, after G.G. (Graham Greene) compared me to him. ... yes, I do think he wrote like me (laughing) Chekhov has similar attitude to story and character."\textsuperscript{17}

Narayan's dispassionate comic detachment is the indication of a personal endeavour to attain a balance in his life, to surmount and rationalize the emptiness of the 'profound and unmitigated loneliness created by his wife's sudden demise. It was so sudden and traumatic that Narayan, as Ved Mehta records in his interview, "... considered following her into the funeral pyre". The personal realization, as already mentioned in the second chapter of this thesis, has been depicted in 'The English Teacher'.
As Krishnan realizes that to live without illusions would
be the greatest task for him now, his author, Narayan also
realized after his traumatic experience that all twist and
turns of destiny would cease to shock and agonise if nothing
more than the barest truths and facts of life were expected.
Subsequent novels - 'Mr. Sampath', 'The Financial Expert',
'The Guide', 'The Man- Eater of Malgudi', 'The Vendor of
Sweets' and 'A Tiger For Malgudi' - all followed 'The English
Teacher' and their comic thematic pattern in one of illusion
realization - disillusionment or catastrophe - self-awareness
resolution.

Therefore, his humour is not a device but a way of
life, a reference. It is deep-rooted in a traditional ethos
and a scale of values, having a special reference to the
institution of family which constitutes Narayan's sensibility -
milieu.

A few examples through illustrations will clarify
the point of discussion:

**Humour in Absurdities and Contradictions in Public Life.**

Narayan portrays scenes and situations to amuse his
readers, but deeper meaning lies within, and that is, he
intends to show how in India the relative absense of privacy
puzzles the individual person. He has no power to desist the
human tendency from regarding private affairs as a matter of
public interest and concern. Our novelist finds excellent
novel material in such scenes and situations. In 'The
Financial Expert' Margayya's son, Balu has thrown the red
account-book to oblivion down a deep gutter. In causes a
great deal of concern to Margayya who is a money-lender.
Under the pressure of annoyance he begins to punish his son
on the road. The intervening crowd quickly gathers at once
and perversely regards Balu as a hero of the whole scene. A
group of individuals goes to the extent of stripping Margayya
off his parental authority. The scene serves as a splendid
example of the way the novelist astutely conveys the quick
psychological succession of events. "Someone dragged away
the child crying:

"Save the child from this ruffian" . . . A woman
with a basket came forward to ask, "Are you a heartless demon?
. . . She flung down the basket and picked up the child on her
arm. Balu copiously sobbed on her shoulder. Another woman
tried to take him from her, commenting "only those who bear
the child for ten months in the womb know how precious it is.
Men are like this. Someone objected to this statement . .
retorted with great warmth: "Boys must be chastised; other-
wise do you want them to grow up into devils?" Margayya looked
at him gratefully. Here at least was a friend in this abso-
lutely hostile world. He swept his arms to address all the
woman and the gathering. It's all very well for you to talk . .
But he has thrown in there an important account book. What
am I to do without it?" (PP.34-35).

Society is pressing upon Margayya from all sides.
Everyone seems to talk to him arrogantly except the man who
supports his action and speaks rationally. But he too
is gone. He is well-acquainted with the tendency of his son who will not prefer his sympathizers to go until they take him to the shop and bring him peppermints. Margayya is afraid of society because no one will let him do what he likes. The folk even in the next house seem to have no better business than to hang about to see what is happening to Margayya. At home even his wife is to behave rudely. She expresses her annoyance in a threatening way. He loses temper again. The whole situation for Margayya is full of absurdities and contradictions.

In "Waiting For the Mahatama" there are splendidly funny scenes. The scene of reception given to Mahatama Gandhi who visits Malgudi as a political leader serves a unique example of the balanced comic tone and the centrality of human issues. Gandhiji and the chairman of the Malgudian Municipality are presented in contrast with each other for the former is the champion of love and humanity while the latter is a socially-suppressed sycophant who poses himself to be a social-servant. Narayan hurl a mild satire against him and the District Collector who are too conscious to escape the impact of the British Empire, particularly in respect of treating the Mahatama only as a social reformer and not as a political leader. The scene reaches a satiric climax at Meelbagh when the chairman tries to secure Khaddar garments for himself and the family, including a hundred mile drive "within the city in order to search for a white Khaddar cap to fit his six-year old son's dolichocephalic head". (p. 39); the display of oranges from
Natesh - chairman's Mempi - estates and Gandhiji's declining of orange juice because "it was not his hour for taking anything". (P.41); the Mahatama distributing Natesh's fruits to school-children; the chairman's chagrin "at the thought that the event was developing into a children's party" (P.41); and the Malgudian people swarming over his garden and "plucking flowers in his annual bed, which had been tended by the municipal overseers". (P.40).

Gandhiji may be the exception to India but Natesh is typical in respect of being found everywhere in the country.

Humour of Character

In 'The Guide' Raju is mistaken for a holy saint and Narayan blends comic irony and incongruity into one to display universal interest solely because the situation has an archetypal pattern. Humour serves in the unconventional as well as accidental way to exhibit Raju in possession of archetype. In this instance comedy is based on the archetype of withdrawal, renunciation and non-attachment. Raju's comic nobility in the way he ultimately sustains to the cultural motivation and pattern is a noticeable example.

This archetypal comedy, in a different but equally natural kind, serves to give 'The Man-Eater of Malgudi' a distinctive flavour and structural coherence. Vasu is paralleled with the mythic archetype, the rakshasa with a view to correlating human actions and cosmic motives.
The metaphysics of Karma in the Indian context is happily accepted as a source to show the protagonists obtusely attempting to blame Fate for all kinds of happenings. Such happenings have obvious explanations because they are partly the outcome of a man's actions and partly the result of unfavourable circumstances. But it will not be surprising to note that Karma in Narayan's fiction is depicted very much on the proposition that character is fate. It means clearly that the protagonist's misfortune may be the outcome of his personality which is not balanced, and rooted in innate perversity. His salvation, therefore, may result from inner redeemable qualities.

This idea is given an ironic twist in the short story, 'The Trail of The Green Blazer' with the intention to show that life is not a joke to live on. The protagonist Raju, a pick-pocket is a past-master to watch crowds with professional concentration. With much care and choice he selects his victim a man in green blazer. He is moved to pity to discover that the purse which he has picked up contains a balloon meant for the motherless boy. Unable to pass on the thought of sobbing motherless child deprived of his balloon, he is caught attempting to slip the balloon back into 'Green Blazer's Pocket. His statement to the magistrate that he was trying to return the purse "became a stock-joke in the police world". The story is concluded in conformity with moral as well as in keeping with the central irony:
"He served his term of 18 months and came back into the world - not quite decided what he should do with himself. He told himself; If ever I pick up something again, I shall make sure I don't have to put it back'. For now he believed God had gifted the likes of him with only one-way deftness. Those fingers not meant to put anything back". (PP.18-19).

Raju's pity is explicitly in contradiction to his self-interest. But he has imagination to indulge, like other protagonists of Narayan's novels, in dramas of compassion and catastrophe. Raju, Sriram, Natraj, Sambu, Margayya, Sampath, Srinivas - all invite troubles which end in disaster and cause their sublimation.

Vasu, Ramani, Kailas and Margayya are invented on the basis of aggressiveness, 'extroversion and wilful evil-mindedness. They are self-assertive people and under the pressure of their ambitiously burdened minds they commit several blunders and become laughing-stock. They for a while try to disengage themselves from the rat-race, they are unable to escape temptations of the world.

It is, thus, clear that humour in Narayan's fiction is composed of irony, satire, wit, repartee, joke, retorts and skilful handling of the English language. For instance, his humour is discernible not only in the portrayal of eccentric characters, but it is curiously and closely woven in the texture of his prose. The following excerpt from 'The Man Eater Of Malgudi' clarifies it;
"Clients who went to him once never went again, as they sneezed interminably and caught their death of cold, asthematics went down for weeks after a legal consultation. His clients preferred to see him as he lounged about the premises of the district court in search of business, and he tackled their problems standing in the verandah of the court or under the shade of a tamarind tree in the compound. But he liked his inexperienced clients first to meet him at his office and catch a cold. I tried to dodge his proposal, but he was adamant that I should meet him in the narrow room above the cotton shop". (P.53).

Here Narayan relies on exaggeration to induce laughter. In 'The English Teacher', the protagonist, Krishnan compares himself with the cow and curses his existence which has left behind a 'sense of something missing'.

In 'A Tiger For Malgudi', the captain's wife who feels tired of her husband mutters:

"He has lost all sense of humour, the slightest upset and he flounces out, let him — I don't care — only animals seem to be fit for his company". 

In the Collector's Office the villagers who are baffled to have visited it twenty times feel confounded on hearing 'come tomorrow'. The office clerk irritates them by saying that no one has invited them. He mutters:

"The officer is always on tour, what can I do if everyone comes and bothers me? Am I the officer drawing a fat salary?" (P.39.).
The Master - Hermit instructs Raja and tells him ironically about the old age:

"Raja, oldage has come on you. Beautiful old days, when faculties are dimmed one by one, so that they may be restful, very much like extinguishing lights in a home, one by one, before one goes to sleep". (P.174).

The fusion of tragic - comic is superb and Shakespearean in tone. This is the great achievement of Narayan as a novelist who knows how to exploit the possibilities of a comic irony and colouring it with the hue of tragic.

Therefore, Professor K.R. Srinivas is right in his assertion that Narayan is the master of 'serious comedy'.

**Psychological Study of His Characters**

Almost all protagonists of Narayan's novels are blend of individual and type. They are individual in the sense that they have a similar quest for identity with the intention to reach the reality. In course of their journey to their goal they are allowed to cross an angry river of difficult situations, twist and turns, and several ups and downs of their human fate. They suffer from apprehension, weakness and nervousness coupled the pressure of unfavourable circumstances, which ironically enough, help them to grow into spiritual maturity. They are typical for the reason that they represent the living human beings in the contemporary context and donot look alien at home, at least at last when they vanish into life. As already pointed out by R.K. Narayan's fellow
novelist, Santa Rama Rao, that the ultimate aim of the Hindu
is not to attain happiness in the Western sense, but desireless-
ness, Narayan's protagonists right from 'The Bachelor of Arts'
to his latest novel, 'A Tiger For Malgudi' (Chandran and Raja)
are engulfed in a perpetual struggle to attain spiritual maturity
as well as psychological consistency. However, Narayan hardly
imposes Freudian psychology on the analytical study of his
characters. He applies general psychology meant to read and
analyse the workings of ordinary people's minds. These ordinary
people of middle class families have a mark potential for the
uncommon and this mentality leads them to mental aberration.
They are unable to control the unusual flow of their minds,
which become obsessed with peculiar ideas. For instance,
Margayya's greed for money and happy living brings him in face
of shaky circumstances which draw him away from his original
self. He comes to normal condition of mind only when he has
paid enough for his greed. Sampath in 'Mr. Sampath' is a
printer by profession and his company with Srinivas is likely
to yield good result through the Weekly paper 'The Banner'.
But Shanti becomes instrumental in getting him deviated from
his routine self. He forsakes his own duty and undertakes to
participate in a film-venture, 'The Burning of Kama' - He even
persuades Srinivas to write the film - script. The shooting of
the film is disrupted by an artist Ravi who also works for
'The Banner'. Raju, in 'The Guide' also starts as an ordinary
shopkeeper of books but his unbridled imagination forces him
to become a tourist guide. It is here that he comes in contact
with Marco and his dissatisfied wife, Rosie, who help him in
his development to become extraordinary. Rosie is a clear-headed married woman whose dissatisfaction with her husband induces a feeling of revolt in her. Raju, a rogue in the garb of a tourist guide, takes advantage of this shaky relationship between the two. He is a past-master in the art of perception. Moreover, Rosie's own ambitious nature helps Raju in winning her attention and assuring her that all is not lost for her.

When Marco, the archeologist scholar, comes to sense the illegitimate relationship between Rosie and Raju, he has no choice but to abandon her at the Malgudi station. She comes to Raju whom she considers a friend in need. She is received there without ifs and buts. It is later that Raju's mother and maternal uncle object her presence and do not allow her to continue the practice of dance. Raju revolts against the social code and Rosie's company brings him into precarious conditions, which he is unable to control. Narayan seems to imply that the individuals like Raju are always in trouble because they easily take up the suggestions of others so much so that their personalities appear to be the products of other people's convictions. Raju is extremely susceptible to what others suggest and this plasticity of response not only determines his career but also the ultimate destiny. Raju's metamorphosis from shopkeeper to tourist guide to inflatuated lover to impresario of dance to jail-bird to yogi to potential martyr is a sort of escapism which is happily recognised as great box-office material by cinema studios. Dr. C. Paul Verghese is right in his statement that

"Raju is more complex than any other character of Narayan's novels. In him we find the craftiness, dishonesty
and credulity of Margayya and the fleshy bombast of 'Mr. Sampath', the adventurousness of Mali in 'The Vendor of Sweets', the romantic excess of Sriram in 'Waiting For the Mahatama' and the mystical learning of Chandran in 'The Bachelor of Arts' and Srinivas in 'Mr. Sampath'.

Dr. Nirmal Mukerji finds Narayan an implicit moralist whose satire has no bite because he seems so satisfied with the Indian world he ridicules. Absurdity and fantasy are so closely woven with realism, particularly in respect of characterization that his major characters, while well-developed, appear to be elusive. They try to embody truth without being true to life. Raju, Margayya, Sriram, Natraj, Raman, Sampath, Srinivas and even the Hermit and Sambu are made of the same stuff. The Hermit who transforms the inner being of the tiger in 'A Tiger For Malgudi' is developed so comprehensively that he outmatches Chandran and Raju. Fantasy and realism are so interwoven successfully that it is difficult to infer in which way the wind will blow. However, the recurrent pattern in character - growth as cited by Professor Rajeev Taranath, remains the same in all major novels of Narayan (from average to extraordinary to a more poignant state of average). It is definitely in the end that almost all the protagonists of Narayan's novels come to understand that individual aberrations may be tolerated for sometime by society or the gods, but they are bound to be eroded at last for the sake of realizing the fact that the actual life on this earth requires harmony, balance and proportion. And herein lies the greatest achievement of the novelist, mainly so because he is a moral analyst and
a dedicated artist who knows how to improve the individual. It appears that Narayan's great concern is with the individual's improvement, and if that happens, society is likely to be benefitted by such improvement.

Krishnan, the bored intellectual of 'The English Teacher' who could 'dawdle over the attendance for a quarter of an hour' (P.9) is flabbergasted by the cruelest blow. He escapes from a routine job in order to enrich his life with his beautiful wife Sushila who appears to him a "phantom of delight" (P.49). This Wordsworthian happiness is thwarted by Sushila's contracting typhoid, eventually resulting into her death. Krishnan embeds himself in a slough of despond: "Nothing else will worry or interest me in life' hereafter" (P.108). He becomes a "Professional receptacle of condolence" (P.109) until absurdity - fantasy ungrips him and he begins to receive telepathic messages from the soul of his deceased wife. As a spirit she bubbles over with ecstasy and her philosophical discourses in the main to distinguish between the material and immaterial worlds make Krishnan more heavy-hearted and suicidal until he learns to ease up from effort and attention and is receptive to psychic phenomena. Krishnan and Sushila are the embodiment of a charming and creditable couple whose marital trials and treasures are touchingly sketched in the realistic segment of the novel. When she becomes a blithe spirit and begins to join in the nightly contacts with her husband, the pathos is too strained to be taken for granted.

The anonymous as well as insomniac Headmaster in 'The English Teacher' who runs an experimental school for the
children on the 'Leave Them Alone System' is the only other important character besides Krishnan's daughter Leela. His rejection of his own churlish wife and shabby and noisy children in addition to his preparation for the predicted death are in total contrast to Krishnan's happy married life, that remains happier even after the death of his wife. Undoubtedly, the Headmaster is an amalgamation of absurdity and fantasy and hardly appears to be the creature of the real world.

Margayya in 'The Financial Expert' has been hailed Narayan's supreme creation to date. There is no doubt that the main characters appear to be little better than caricatures, they are in accordance with the subject of the novel. In the five parts of the novel, five phases of Margayya's developments are presented engagingly. In the first phase of his development he is introduced as a financial adviser to the peasants. He sits under a banyan tree in front of the Nalgudi central Co-operative Land Mortgage Bank and transacts business with a grey, discoloured, knobby tin trunk. In the second phase of his development he rises to be a prosperous publisher, in collaboration with the printer Mr. Lal, of 'Domestic Harmony' ("Originally called 'Bed Life' or the science of Marital Happiness"). In the third phase he is seen a financial adviser and money-lender to the peasants having his own office in Market Road. The fourth phase of his development brings him to be the financial wizard who is seen heavily engaged in receiving deposits and paying fabulous rates of interest. And the fifth phase brings out Margayya as 'insolvent' with
a prospective return under the same banyan tree wherefrom he had started.

Mārgāyyā's son, Balu has a close resemblance with Mali in 'The Vendor of Sweets'. Dr Pal who offers Mārgāyyā, the book on 'Bed Life' to publish subsequently becomes instrumental in bringing about his downfall, Professor Iyengar rightly points out:

"There is a certain chain of Nemesis in the intersecting relationships between Dr. Pal and Mārgāyyā, the apostles of sex and money". 23

Vasu and Natraj in 'The Man-Eater of Malgudi' are a close contrast to each other. Vasu seems to be the reincarnation of Kailash-Sampath-Mārgāyyā Raju. His arrival in Malgudi on the one hand in a symbol of disturbance to Natraj, his companions and particularly to Sastri, on the other it signifies how precious a wild-life is existing in Mempi forest. He is a taxidermist by profession, but to Sastri he appears to be a rakshasa on account of his strong fighter like body and wild tastes. He has "a tanned face, large powerful eyes under thick eye-brows, a large forehead and a shock of unkempt hair, like a black halo". (P.13). Vasu is a symbol of a demon in search of more and more power. But he wants to seek this power through science and knowledge. He boldly tells Natraj: "After all we are civilized human beings, educated and cultured, and it is upto us to prove our superiority to nature. Science conquers nature in a new way each day: Why not in creation also? That is my philosophy sir. I challenge anyman to contradict me". (P.15)
With this philosophy he begins to ravage nature and stuffs Natraj's attic of the press with carcasses of different kinds of animals and birds. He is a threat to religion, social order and peaceful order of Malgudi town. The spirit of the town is keen to save her people from the tight grip of a living monster. He dies at last under mysterious circumstances and the novel acquires the suspense of a detective novel. Narayan has already given hints about the way Vasu is likely to end. Natraj, Sastri, the poet, the journalist and the temple woman, Rangi— all are loveable characters who come in contact with Vasu and learn about objectionable activities. There is always a sense of fear prevailing in Malgudian world after Vasu's arrival, and placidity is restored only after his sudden death. His end is mythicized with that of the Hindu mythical demon, Bhasmasur.

'The Vendor of Sweets' presents a more advanced character, Jagan who is a sweet-vendor by profession but a Gandhite and a follower of the Gita in his thinking and conduct. He is not a practical man endowed with worldly wisdom and commonsense. His very first sentence contradicts what he says and what he does:

"Conquer taste and you will have conquered the self" said Jagan to his listeners, who asked, "why conquer the self?" Jagan said "I don't know, but all our sages advises us so"(P.7). It is ironical that Jagan is speaking against his profession. He is a sweet-vendor and if people conquer their taste, his sale may be in danger. But he is little concerned with this
practical philosophy of worldly wisdom. Jagan is Gandhian in his dress, food, habits and daily spinning. But his son, Mali is just the opposite. He is a representative of the ultramodern American-returned young men who do not believe in anything Indian except money. Mali has no scruples, knows no morals, and is given to all kinds of sinful activities. He has returned from America with Grace, a half-American and half-American woman and a grandiose scheme to manufacture novel-writing machine. He has no regard for Jagan but he is extremely hopeful to extort the whole money the old man has got under his possession. Jagan's alter ego is his 'cousin', a confidant, an advisor, an emissary extraordinary and an expert manager in an emergency. When Jagan comes to know about Mali's sinful union with Grace whom he brought to India with a promise to marry but did not marry at all, he is extremely disappointed. Under such conditions he finds unable to live with his son. Moreover when he learns that Mali has been arrested for the illegal possession of liquor, the cousin is authorised to take the necessary step. But Jagan adds significantly, "A dose of prison life is not a bad thing. It may be what he needs now". (PP. 191-92).

Jagan is a bundle of simplicity and shrewdness, 'candour and fussiness'. He has a capacity to become other-worldly and this-worldly at the same time. At sixty he is reborn and enters a new birth symbolically, for he is ready to give up vending sweets and watching a goddess come out of stone. Mali is a blend of absurdity and fantasy and realism is alien to his personality.
In 'The Painter of Signs' (1977), 'Second Opinion' (1982) and 'A Tiger For Malgudi' (1983) Narayan keeps the same pattern recurrently in the delineation of his characters. Raman and Sambu appear to be made of the same stuff. They are blend of absurdity and fantasy and realism is also hardly wanting in their personalities. Raman lives in the world of fantasy and is unable to cope with such a dominating as well as obsessive beloved as Daisy. As Rosie in 'The Guide' was obsessive with the idea of dance so is daisy with the idea of family planning. Raju falls because of Rosie and his own ambiguous nature, Raman also gets a lesson eventually to get rid of woman and march towards the Boardless - "that solid world of sublime souls who minded their own business" (P.183). In 'Second Opinion' there is no heroine at all and Sambu and his mother are presented as poles apart. Both present a contrast to each other - mother symbolizes the old and the son the new.

In the latest novel 'A Tiger For Malgudi' Narayan presents Raja, who is not a human being but a ferocious tiger. He is shown to possess the same ego as is found in human beings. Though Raja is incapable of audible speech, it is made of ego, values, outlook and the ability to communicate. Narayan himself points out in his introduction of the novel:

"Why tiger? Why not a mouse? asked a smart journalist who had come to interview me, when I mentioned the subject of my novel. I could only reply, "so that the chief character may not be trampled upon or lost sight of in a hole"."
Another important character in the novel is the 'Tiger Hermit' who employs his power to save Raja and transform him inwardly. He is a mystic and the master of meditation, entirely different in Nature in comparison to other pseudo-saints of Narayan's previous novels. He is a sanyasi who has renounced everything and undergone a complete change of personality. He has freed himself from all worldly possessions and human ties so much so that he does not allow his abandoned wife to stay with him in the Kempi forest. It is on account of his strange psychic power that he is able to overcome Raja and transform his inner being. The captain of 'Grand Malgudi Circus' and his wife are no better than caricatures. His wife comments, "He has lost all sense of humour, the slightest upsets and he flounces out, let him --- I don't care. Only animals seem to be fit for his company". (P.38).

It is, therefore, obvious that Narayan's world of Malgudi abounds in eccentricities of its people. Inspite of their oddness and incongruities, they appear to be real people of flesh and blood. Women characters are comparatively weak but Narayan does not give portraits of exceptional men and women characters. Besides the chief characters, the minor characters are also depicted from the lower class of people of South Indian society. The blacksmith burglar and his wife Ponni in 'The Dark Room', the cartboy and his companions in 'Swami & Friends', the common clients of Kargayya in 'The Financial Expert', Gafur in 'The Guide' are some examples of this unimportant section of society.
As is obvious from these characters Narayan is, to a great extent, a traditionalist in the matter of characterization. He is fully conscious of his limitations and that is why he does not attempt to draw any character with whose psychology he is not familiar and who does not come within his range. Dr. Harish Raizada is right in his incisive observation that Narayan is concerned with depicting.

"Man in relation to God, to politics, to abstract ideas passed by him; it is only when he sees him with his family and his neighbours and that his creative impulse begins to stir to activity". 25

These wonderful characters are the source of Narayan's creative amusement which is restricted to his own class, mentality and conviction. There is explicitly a norm of excellence blow which he cannot possibly lower himself. That is why, sex, violence and pornographic details are beyond his depiction. He is a moral-analyst who advances the genre of Indo-English novel considerably with his resolution of his unique handling of character, focus on the individual identity, and his Indianization of East-West theme. It is only within his capacity to handle the subject of life after death and that of the existence of soul in every creature of this world, no matter whether the possessor is a human being or a ferocious tiger. His characters are South Indians but they "have their kinship with all humanity". 26
(1) K.R. Srinivas Iyengar: Indian Writing In English: P. 384.

(2) Graham Greene: Introduction to 'The Financial Expert' P. VII.


(6) Ved Mehta: The Train Had Just Arrived At Malgudi Station: P. 79.

(7) Interview of the Fortnight: India Today, 15 February, 1982, P. 41.

(8) Ved Mehta: The Train Had Just Arrived at Malgudi Station: P. 78.


(14) Megal, "The Philosophy Of Fine Art": P.70.


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